

A Study on the Difficulty of Japanese Reading Tests

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The purpose of this study is to find out which factors influence the difficulty in Japanese reading items within a multiple-choice testing format.

50 reading comprehension items taken from 5 reading tests for college level foreign students was the data used. According to the prescription of reading task types by "Shutsudai Kijun" (Association of International Education, Japan and The Japan Foundation, 1994), I categorized 50 items into task type groups, and compared the correct option percentage of the items.

The following three points were the focus of this analysis.

- (1) Can the differences in text difficulty alone explain the differences in difficulty among the 5 tests?
- (2) Is there any observable tendency in reading item difficulty depending on the task type?
- (3) What are the factors which seem to influence reading item difficulty besides difficulty of text and type of task?

The primary aim of this study was on (2) and (3). Negation of (1) was

taken here as a presupposition for (2) and (3).

As a result of my analysis, the following tendencies were observed.

- a) The difficulty in tasks about language form and vocabulary differs depending on whether the correct option can be reached with the help of the context information.
- b) When the reader's outside-text-knowledge is significant in choosing the correct option, the item tends to be difficult.
- c) The difficulty in a conjunction-inserting task is influenced more by the clearness of the relation between the parts (sentences or paragraphs to be connected) than the difficulty of the conjunction form itself.
- d) A paragraph-ordering task which requires a skill that is not used in usual reading tends to be very difficult.
- e) It seems more difficult to find what is not said in the text than to find what is said in the text.
- f) The more plausible the incorrect option is, the more difficult the item tends to be.
- g) When there is lexical overlap between the words in the correct option and the words in the text, the item tends to be easier. On the contrary, when there is lexical overlap between the words in the incorrect option and the words in the text, the item tends to be more difficult.

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